

Setting the Record Straight

In recent years, voucher advocates have spent millions of dollars on sophisticated advertisements and publications designed to sway public opinion and convince Americans that their legitimate reservations about vouchers are unwarranted. Although those efforts have largely failed, voucher advocates continue to put forth unsubstantiated claims in support of vouchers. This chapter examines several of the most common myths about vouchers and offers evidence to refute them.

Myth 1: Vouchers empower parents to choose the school their child attends.

In reality, private schools, not parents, make the final decision about whether a child will attend a particular school. In the Milwaukee voucher program, the private schools determine how many students with vouchers *they* want to enroll, and they may hold a lottery to determine which students they will accept.¹ “We wanted parental choice. They’re talking about school choice. And when you’re talking about school choice, you’re not talking about parents selecting schools; you’re talking about schools selecting parents,” said Annette “Polly” Williams, the author of the legislation that created the Milwaukee program,² speaking about nine years after the program began.

In the Cleveland voucher program, private schools can reject students on the basis of past academic performance or for disciplinary reasons.³ A spokesperson for the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland confirms that its schools have maintained their pre-voucher student admissions policies, even for students with tax-funded vouchers.⁴ Under the original terms of Cleveland’s voucher program, private schools were to accept students randomly, but many religious schools objected to this requirement and it was dropped. “They didn’t want to be hampered in terms of accepting students,” said Bert Holt, the program’s original director.⁵

There is another problem for parents who want to enroll their child in a voucher school: They may not be able to find one they can afford. For example, the Children’s Scholarship Fund, one of the largest organizations in the country to offer privately funded vouchers, covers just 20 percent to 65 percent of tuition for students who get its vouchers.⁶ Parents must make up the difference, which can amount to several thousand dollars, and low-income parents are likely to find this difficult. Parents also may not be able to afford the many private school costs beyond tuition, such as uniforms, books, and activity fees.⁷

Myth 2: Vouchers will save taxpayers money because private schools educate students at lower costs.

In reality, vouchers are likely to cost taxpayers extra money because they necessitate funding two school systems, one public and one private. The school voucher proposal that California

voters rejected in November 2000 would have cost state taxpayers \$3.2 billion per year just to give vouchers to students already enrolled in private schools.⁸ Likewise, a voucher proposal that Michigan voters rejected in November 2000 would initially have cost state taxpayers \$35 million to provide vouchers for students already enrolled in private schools in a few districts; if fully implemented statewide, it could have cost \$772 million for all students already in private school.⁹ A study by Columbia University Professor Henry Levin concluded that a national voucher program would cost taxpayers an additional \$20 billion to \$33 billion annually just to pay the tuition of students already in private schools.¹⁰

During the 2000-01 school year, 238 Wisconsin public school districts lost tax dollars to Milwaukee private schools, making it necessary for them to raise local property taxes to offset those losses. Taxpayers in Milwaukee also lost out because, as a state report noted, the “costs to MPS [Milwaukee Public Schools] property taxpayers were higher than they would have been in the absence of the choice program.”¹¹ Moreover, tuition at many private schools, most of them nonreligious, exceeds the per-pupil cost for public school students.¹² And private school tuition does not represent the actual cost to educate students: Many private schools also get money from church contributions, endowments, and activity fees, as well as aid and services, such as transportation, from taxpayers’ money.

Myth 3: Vouchers represent big savings for the public schools because they no longer have to educate the students who transfer to voucher schools.

This simplistic notion defies the realities of voucher programs and public school expenditures. A school district would realize significant savings from voucher transfers only if sizeable numbers of students from a single grade in a single school or from a school with a small pupil population transferred out. Where there is a drastic loss of students in one grade, the school district could cut costs by reducing staff—the most expensive item in a district’s budget—and perhaps expenditures for building maintenance and school buses. Or, in the case of a school with a small student population, the school might close altogether.

However, a 1999 study by the accounting firm KPMG reflects what is more likely to occur. It found that voucher students who left Cleveland’s public schools were drawn from throughout the district, and the public schools were “losing [state aid] without a change in their overall operating costs.” A few years later, another study revealed that most of Cleveland’s voucher students had never even been in the public schools, further dispelling the claim that vouchers represent a cost savings for public schools.¹³

Former Milwaukee Public Schools Superintendent Spence Korte explained how vouchers affect a public system: “If we have 165 schools in the district ... and lose all the kids from one school, that’s not a problem. What we do is lose a little bit everywhere, instead of being able to lose it in such a way that we can consolidate in a particular building. We don’t heat the building two degrees less because a few kids went to a choice program.”¹⁴

Myth 4: Private school parents are taxed twice since they must pay taxes for public schools but also pay their own child's tuition. They deserve vouchers to eliminate this "double taxation."

The proposition that people who pay to send their children to private school are victims of double taxation is without merit. Taxes pay for a variety of public services that benefit society as a whole. A personal decision to pay for a private service does not reduce a person's obligation to fund—through taxes—a similar publicly available service, and it does not make the individual eligible for a tax-funded voucher or rebate. Taxpayers who drive to work instead of using public transportation do not receive a voucher to pay for their car or gas. Such a policy would bankrupt a city's public transit system and harm all those people who do use that public service. The same goes for vouchers and public schools. And there are many other analogous cases. Do taxpayers who purchase a home security system get a voucher drawn against the public budget for police protection? Do taxpayers who purchase a fire extinguisher or even a sprinkler system get a voucher to help them pay for their personal fire protection? What about a taxpayer who joins a private country club instead of going to a public park? Or one who buys books instead of using the public library? The point is that even people who choose to use a private service benefit—because their community benefits—when a similar, publicly funded service is available.

The "double taxation" argument also ignores the way voucher programs work. At a per-student cost of more than \$5,700 in Milwaukee, a voucher is less about "giving back" an individual's tax money than about handing over the contributions of other taxpayers to one person. Take the case of a Milwaukee family with three school-age children. Providing all three children with a voucher would cost more than \$17,000 a year, and since few families pay \$17,000 a year in education taxes, it is hardly accurate to characterize the voucher as the parents' tax money coming back to them. It is part of the money paid by *all* taxpayers, including those households—and they are in the majority—that do not have school-age children. Individual taxpayers cannot reasonably argue that voucher funds are exclusively theirs any more than they can argue that they alone have an exclusive interest in American education, or an exclusive right to determine how public funds are spent.

Myth 5: Vouchers have improved students' academic achievement.

Credible research indicates that such claims are unfounded, and in some cases, the opposite is true. Research studies of the Milwaukee and Cleveland voucher programs commissioned by the states of Wisconsin and Ohio have "found little or no difference in voucher and public school students' performance."¹⁵ As already noted, one study found that students who attended private schools established in response to the voucher program scored lower than their public school peers in all academic subjects.¹⁶

Moreover, since voucher schools are not obliged to reveal student test scores, or give students the same state assessments as public schools, consistent and adequate data on voucher programs is often lacking. While public school students' achievement on state and national assessments has become front-page news in recent years, voucher schools seldom reveal the academic progress of their students. The Milwaukee program is a case in point. In 1995, after five years of official state evaluations that showed little or no difference between the achievement of voucher and public school students, state lawmakers removed the requirement that schools accepting vouchers provide student achievement data to the state.¹⁷ Needless to say, the voucher schools have not volunteered any information about student achievement since 1995. "For me as a researcher, that is outrageous. This is a critical public policy issue and for that data not to be available is ridiculous," said John Witte, the state's official evaluator in the early 1990s.¹⁸

Voucher supporters have been quick to present studies purporting to show that vouchers do improve student achievement. At best, the improvements claimed are minimal, and the studies often have received substantial criticism from other researchers. One such study about privately funded vouchers, which was released in the summer of 2000, suggested that vouchers had resulted in significant gains by African-American students.¹⁹ The study, led by Paul Peterson, who is known for his support of vouchers, received extensive coverage in the press. However, within weeks, the research company that had gathered data for the study issued a press release to announce that the claims of success were "premature" because vouchers had not made a difference for students.²⁰ Undaunted by this public rebuke, voucher advocates continue to point to this study as clear evidence that vouchers work. One pro-voucher organization has even referred to it in a print advertisement headlined "The Truth."²¹

(For a more detailed discussion of the research on voucher programs, see Chapter 4.)

Myth 6: Vouchers increase accountability because private schools must satisfy parents.

While voucher parents often declare themselves satisfied with the schools their children are attending, that does not mean those schools are publicly accountable to all taxpayers. In reality, voucher programs make a mockery of public accountability by channeling tax dollars into private schools that need not comply with open-meetings and open-records laws, adhere to state academic standards, or report on students' academic achievement. The common refrain of voucher advocates that the private schools are accountable to the parents is insufficient for the simple reason that voucher programs are not paid for solely by the participating students' parents. Rather, all taxpayers fund voucher programs, and schools receiving public dollars must be accountable to *all* taxpayers.

In fact, the existing voucher programs in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Florida require very little in the way of oversight or accountability. The same is true of the California and Michigan

school voucher proposals, which were defeated in 2000. The California proposal did not require voucher schools to have financial audits or to submit financial statements to the state.²² In Michigan, the voucher schools would not have had to make financial or academic records available to the public.²³ But this use of taxpayer dollars with virtually no oversight is common to all voucher proposals—and to the tuition tax credit proposals that are increasingly popular with voucher advocates.

(For more information on the lack of accountability in voucher schools, see Chapter 2.)

Myth 7: Vouchers will introduce competition and therefore force the public schools to improve.

This claim is based more on speculation than evidence, as a recent RAND Corp. analysis points out.²⁴ Indeed, the claim defies common sense, as we can see from looking at both Cleveland and Milwaukee. Diverting millions of dollars from those cities' public schools, often to pay the tuition of students already in private schools, is hardly a strategy for improving the public schools.

In the most publicized attempt to demonstrate that vouchers actually help public schools, a 2001 study by Jay Greene for the pro-voucher Manhattan Institute concluded that the threat of vouchers led to an improvement in Florida's public schools.²⁵ However, numerous other researchers have roundly criticized those conclusions, saying that the evidence simply is not there and that Greene ignored some key factors.²⁶ For example, critics note that he did not consider the impact of state assistance, which provided extra teachers and additional resources for struggling schools; nor did he attempt to isolate the effect of being stigmatized as a "failing school." Critics also point to the improvements made by struggling public schools in other states that, like Florida, grade schools but that do not offer vouchers.²⁷ And, as Stanford University professor Martin Carnoy notes, low-performing public schools in Florida—*before* the voucher program was implemented—also showed higher test score gains than other schools. This occurred without any so-called voucher threat because the voucher program did not yet exist.²⁸

The competition claim also ignores a key factor: Private voucher schools are allowed to play by a completely different set of rules than public schools. They do not have to accept and educate any child who wants to attend. They do not have to adhere to the same academic standards as public schools—making accurate comparisons between the two types of schools difficult. True competition requires that public and private schools operate under the same rules. Unless that happens, any notion that vouchers have introduced competition is disingenuous.

Myth 8: Vouchers are an “escape hatch” for students from poor families who are stuck in failing public schools. Granting vouchers is the morally right thing to do.

For many voucher advocates, this is merely a smokescreen. Their real goal is a universal voucher system open to families of all incomes and including all current private school students. The 2000 California voucher proposal was one such example. Despite the talk about vouchers as a new “civil rights” program for the neediest children, these voucher supporters sometimes reveal their true motivations.

For example, economist Milton Friedman, the father of the voucher movement, has criticized targeted programs, arguing instead for a universal voucher system. Ironically, his foundation has contributed financially to the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO), which promotes targeted vouchers for low-income children. But Friedman clearly sees the targeted approach merely as a means to an end, noting that “a program for the poor will be a poor program.”²⁹ Likewise, attorney Clint Bolick of the Institute for Justice, who has often led the battle for vouchers in the courts, has acknowledged his preference for a universal voucher program, although he notes that targeted programs are the politically palatable approach right now.³⁰

Voucher proponents who are genuine supporters of targeted programs question the direction of the current voucher movement. Annette “Polly” Williams, the African-American lawmaker responsible for the Milwaukee voucher legislation, has criticized attempts by powerful voucher advocates to expand the program to students of all incomes: “Too many people in the voucher crowd exploit low-income black children, saying, ‘We are creating vouchers for them,’ when what they really have in mind is bringing in a Trojan horse. They can say what they want, but I’ve never seen a situation where low-income people, when they have to compete in education with people with far more resources, come out equal.”³¹

Furthermore, evidence from current voucher programs calls into question the contention that vouchers serve as an escape mechanism for students in troubled public schools—even when the vouchers are supposedly targeted toward these students. In Cleveland’s program, more students using vouchers *already* attended private schools than transferred out of public schools.³² This, despite the fact that the money that pays for the vouchers comes from a fund meant for disadvantaged public school students. In Milwaukee, during the school year when the voucher program experienced its largest growth (1998-99), only 23 percent of the voucher students had transferred out of the city’s public schools. Thirty-seven percent already were attending private school, and another large percentage were just beginning kindergarten. Commenting on this situation, one voucher school administrator observed, “Many of our current choice [voucher] kids were our students before choice [vouchers].”³³

Whatever voucher proponents say, taking public money from disadvantaged public school students to subsidize the tuition of students already attending a private school hardly furthers civil rights. It also would be difficult to make the case that ignoring the needs of the over-

whelming majority of children in a school district or state—as voucher programs do—is morally right.

Myth 9: Vouchers are just like the G.I. Bill and Pell Grants. What’s the big deal?

In reality, vouchers are not at all like the G.I. Bill or Pell Grants. The G.I. Bill, enacted in 1944, was created in part to restore educational opportunities to members of the armed services who temporarily lost those opportunities because of their military service.³⁴ Vouchers, however, have nothing to do with repaying individuals for service to their nation.

The greatest difference is that the G.I. Bill and Pell Grants help high school graduates who, in the absence of free colleges and universities, might not be able to continue their education. However, the nation does have a system of free K-12 public schools that are open to everyone. Vouchers have not been pushed to promote universal enrollment—since this already exists—but rather as a way to raise student achievement and force existing public schools to improve. Thus, voucher programs should not be compared to college-aid programs, but rather to other—and more effective—efforts to improve student achievement, such as reducing class sizes and increasing professional development for teachers.

Further, while higher education aid programs do provide students with money for college, thus increasing their access to higher education, evidence suggests that the continual increases in college tuition still price out many students, especially those from low-income families. Any attempt to compare vouchers to college aid programs should consider that fact. Weakening our system of free public schools in exchange for vouchers that may not keep up with the inevitable rising costs of tuition would disproportionately disfavor low-income students.

Myth 10: Minority communities are the biggest supporters of school vouchers and clearly favor them.

In fact, African Americans have consistently voted against voucher proposals, and public opinion polls suggest they clearly prefer other education initiatives.

Despite significant overtures to the African-American community by voucher advocates, African Americans overwhelmingly voted against recent voucher initiatives. In California in November 2000, 68 percent of African Americans and 77 percent of Latinos rejected a statewide voucher plan. That same day, 78 percent of African Americans in Michigan rejected a targeted voucher plan.³⁵

The National Urban League’s 2001 “State of Black America” poll showed a rise in voucher opposition by African Americans. In 2001, 58 percent of African Americans said education tax dollars should be spent *only* on public schools, while just 34 percent favored some tax money

going for private school vouchers. A year earlier, in 2000, 41 percent favored private school vouchers.³⁶

In 2001, a nationwide poll conducted by Zogby International for NSBA showed that 57 percent of African Americans oppose vouchers, and the intensity of the opposition is high. For example, more than twice as many African Americans said they “strongly oppose” vouchers rather than “strongly favor” them. The poll also found that African Americans rank vouchers dead last among several ways to improve public schools, and they are more than seven times as likely to choose smaller class sizes over vouchers as a school improvement tool.³⁷ (See Appendix 1 for the complete Zogby poll.)

Note: For periodic updates to “Setting the Record Straight,” please visit NSBA’s Voucher Strategy Center Web site, www.nsba.org/novouchers, and look under NSBA Voucher Reports.

Endnotes

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